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ABSTRACT

This paper begins by explaining the historical context of postsecondary accreditation as an American system for recognizing educational institutions for a level of performance and quality that entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public. The pamphlet next reviews characteristics and functions of accreditation, types of accreditation, steps in the accreditation process, and the values and uses of accreditation. The role of the states and the federal government in supporting accreditation is then discussed, and finally, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation is described, focusing on its role, objectives, governance, structure, and policy development. Includes six references. (JDD)

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Accreditation and the Role of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

Gloria Chernay
Director
Constituent Services

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Accreditation and the Role of the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation

Accreditation is a system for recognizing educational institutions and professional programs affiliated with those institutions for a level of performance, integrity, and quality which entitles them to the confidence of the educational community and the public they serve. In the United States, this recognition is extended primarily through nongovernmental, voluntary institutional or professional associations. These groups establish criteria or standards for accreditation, evaluate institutions and professional programs at their request, and publicly designate those which have achieved accredited status.

While in most other countries educational standards are established and maintained by a central governmental agency, in the United States public authority in education is constitutionally reserved to the states. This has resulted in a wide disparity in kind and quality of education. Accreditation has evolved to promote both regional and national approaches to the determination of educational quality. And while it is basically a voluntary, nongovernmental process, accrediting decisions are considered in many formal actions—by governmental funding agencies, scholarship commissions, foundations, employers, counselors, and potential students. Accrediting bodies have, therefore, come to be viewed as quasi-public entities with certain responsibilities to the many groups which interact with the educational community.

Historical Context

Postsecondary accreditation is a uniquely American educational phenomenon which evolved at the beginning of this century from two strains. Institutional accreditation developed as colleges and schools in various regions of the country formed associations to develop common standards and to address shared concerns such as articulation with secondary schools, transfer credit practices, and admittance to graduate education. Early accreditation standards tended to be prescriptive in nature and called for quantitatively reportable data. But these failed to take into account the diversity of institutions and the needs they were designed to fill. Thus, in the 1930's standards were developed to evaluate the institution not on the basis of fixed characteristics but in terms of the institution's mission and educational objectives as the controlling factors in assessing quality.

Specialized accreditation was derived from professional associations and educators in professional fields that joined together to provide quality assurances concerning educational preparation for entry into professional practice. The first accrediting activities were performed in the field of medicine, and in 1907 the Council on Medical Education

of the American Medical Association in cooperation with the American Association of Medical Colleges published the first list of medical schools which were considered to offer adequate preparation for the medical profession. This prompted other medical schools to improve their educational offerings and strengthen their admission requirements and laid the groundwork for the closing of schools which in the opinion of the AMA were offering inadequate training.

Until the middle of this century, accrediting bodies tended to operate independently without much communication among them and with no oversight of their activities. In 1949 the first coordinating agencies were formed. One, the National Commission on Accrediting (NCA), was established by seven of the major institutionally based higher education organizations concerned about the number and impact of specialized accrediting bodies. Although its main purposes—to reduce the number of specialized accrediting bodies and to incorporate their activities under the regional accrediting bodies—were not achieved, the NCA did establish a review and recognition process that most of the specialized accrediting bodies subscribed to and applied for.

Also in 1949 a very different kind of group, the National Committee of Regional Accrediting Agencies (NCRAA), was formed by the regional commissions to facilitate cooperation and develop common complementary policies and procedures. The NCRAA also published an annual list of regionally accredited institutions. In 1969, this body became the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education (FRACHE). The formation of common policies was very difficult since five of the six regional commissions had to concur on any proposed statement, but the organization did provide a forum for testing new ideas, addressing common concerns, and exchanging information.

There was little involvement of the national organizations with each other until accreditation became more prominent and its use by the federal government increased. With accreditation as a condition for eligibility for federal funds, the need for a single coordinating and recognizing body for accrediting organizations became clear. First steps toward a merger between the NCA and FRACHE were taken in 1971, and in 1975 the merger occurred which resulted in the formation of the Council of Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA).

Characteristics and Functions

As stated earlier, accreditation is defined by its nongovernmental, voluntary nature. It is communal and functions as a self-regulatory entity through the participation of associations of institutions, programs, professionals, and members of the public who constitute the academic "conscience" of educational and professional communities. Accreditation serves as a mechanism for quality assessment and quality enhancement with quality defined as the effective utilization of resources to achieve appropriate educational objectives. Quality assessment implies the evaluation of the institution or program in terms of minimally acceptable standards to protect the public, institutions, and students.

Quality enhancement suggests that the maintenance of minimum standards is not enough, thus another purpose of accreditation is to stimulate institutions and programs to continued self-improvement. *Accreditation assures the educational community, the general public, and other agencies or organizations that an institution or program (a) has clearly defined and educationally appropriate objectives, (b) maintains conditions under which their achievement can reasonably be expected, (c) is in fact accomplishing them substantially, and (d) can be expected to continue to do so.*

Accreditation at the postsecondary level performs a number of important functions in addition to the assurances mentioned above. It aims to foster excellence through the development of criteria for assessing educational effectiveness, encourage improvement through continuous self-study and review, provide counsel and assistance to established and developing institutions and programs, and protect institutions against undue external influences. Postsecondary education in the United States is evidenced by the unique and diverse character of its many individual institutions. These characteristics are maintained by the freedom of the institutions to determine their own objectives and to innovate within the framework of their respective authority and responsibilities. Public as well as educational needs are served, and standards of quality and the integrity of institutions and programs are maintained through accreditation.

Types of Accreditation

The meaning of accredited status depends on the type of accreditation involved. Institutional accreditation is granted by the regional and national accrediting bodies which collectively serve most of the institutions, currently about 6000, chartered or licensed in the United States and its possessions. *Accreditation of the institution is not, and should not be interpreted as being, equivalent to specialized accreditation of a program of the institution and should not be represented as such.* The evaluation focuses on the institution as a whole giving attention not only to the educational program but to such areas as effective management, student personnel services, financial and physical resources, and administrative strength. The standards are related to the achievement of the institutional mission and objectives as determined by the academic community. Degree programs, however specialized, must rest upon a base of liberal or general studies required by all or most students. The institutional accrediting bodies recognized by COPA include nine regional and six national commissions which accredit total operating units only.

Specialized accrediting bodies accredit programs, or schools in the case of single-purpose institutions, that prepare professionals, technicians, or members of special occupations. Specialized accreditation usually applies to fields in which there is a recognized first professional degree and where health, welfare, safety, and professional competence are matters of academic, professional, and public concern. Each specialized accrediting body has its distinctive definitions of eligibility, criteria or standards for accreditation, and operating procedures which have been developed through the cooperation of educators and practitioners as well as with others within their communities of interest, that is, educational institutions, employers, and public agencies. The standards measure reasonable conditions of obtaining the objectives of satisfactory quality.

The crucial dimension of quality in specialized accreditation is the adequacy of the educational program as it relates to professional expectations and requirements for entry and practice in the field. During the review process, among other duties, the site-visit team may review the relationship of the program to the larger unit and the adequacy of the organization and resources of the institution for program maintenance and development. *However, specialized accrediting bodies do not purport to make judgments on the institution as a whole except in the case of single-purpose institutions.* At the present time, COPA recognizes approximately 40 specialized accrediting bodies in such fields as business, engineering, teaching, law, and medicine. Among them is the Committee on Allied Health Education and Accreditation which itself serves as an umbrella agency for approximately twenty review committees.

To some extent, there are cooperative relationships between accrediting bodies. Where specialized programs are offered in multi-purpose institutions, specialized accrediting bodies often look to institutional accreditation to assure the overall health of the institution. Thus, the specialized accrediting body may consider requests for accreditation reviews only from programs affiliated with institutions holding comprehensive accreditation. In addition, cooperative agreements are made, for example, for institutions operating across regional boundaries and for coordinated visits when more than one accrediting body is involved.

Recently, the institutional accrediting bodies adopted a policy on institutional description to assure that an institution holding or seeking accreditation from more than one accrediting body describe itself in identical terms in regard to purpose, governance, programs, degrees, diplomas, certificates, personnel, finances, and constituents and keep each accrediting body apprised of any change in its status with one or another accrediting body. Within the COPA structure, accrediting bodies meet regularly to address issues of common concern. Of current interest is the issue of off-campus education and more specifically accreditation abroad.

The Accreditation Process

The accrediting process has evolved from quantitative to qualitative measures, from the early days of simple checklists to an increasing interest and emphasis in measuring the outcomes of educational experiences. *A common pattern used by both institutional and specialized accrediting bodies includes (a) a rigorous and candid self-study by the institution or program, examining and evaluating objectives, activities, and achievements; (b) an on-site visit by a team of peers who provide expert evaluation and offer suggestions for improvement; and (c) a subsequent review and decision by a central governing commission or board.*

The process begins with the institutional or programmatic self-study, a comprehensive effort to measure progress according to previously accepted objectives and to compare itself with the standards of the accrediting body. The self-study considers the interests of the constituencies—students, faculty, administrators, alumni, trustees, and the community—and results in a written report.

The report serves as the basis for evaluation by a site-visit team from the accrediting body. The site-visit team normally consists of professional educators, specialists selected according to the nature of the institution or program, and members representing specific public interests. The visiting team assesses the institution or program in light of its objectives and provides judgments based on its

own expertise and its external perspective on the degree to which standards are met. The team prepares an evaluation report which is reviewed by the institution or program for factual accuracy.

Subsequently, the original self-study, the team report, and the institution or program response are forwarded to the accrediting commission to be used as the basis for action regarding the accreditation status of the institution or program. Negative actions may be appealed according to established procedures of the accrediting body. Generally, institutions are reviewed every five or ten years.

Accrediting bodies reserve the right to review member institutions or programs at any time for cause. They also reserve the right to review any substantive change such as an expansion from undergraduate to graduate programs or an expansion of off-campus offerings. Such changes may require prior approval or review upon implementation. In this way, accrediting bodies hold their member institutions and programs continually responsible to their educational peers, to the constituents they serve, and to the public.

Values and Uses of Accreditation

Accreditation is used by several constituencies in a variety of ways. It is used by institutions and programs primarily as a stimulus for self-evaluation and self-directed improvement. It provides an assurance of the relevance of preparation for effective contemporary practice, and it facilitates interinstitutional cooperation in diverse ways including admission of students to graduate programs and transfer of credit practices.

The reputation of an accredited institution or program is enhanced because of public regard for accreditation. To the public it provides an assurance of acceptable quality as determined through external evaluation, a commitment to quality enhancement by the institution or program, and a finding of conformity to general expectations in postsecondary education. Accreditation assures improved professional services to the public as accredited programs modify their requirements to reflect changes in knowledge and practice generally accepted in the field.

Accreditation serves the professions by providing a means for the participation of practitioners in setting the requirements for preparation to enter the professions. Also it contributes to the unity of the professions by bringing together practitioners, educators, and students in an activity directed at improving professional preparation and professional practice.

Accreditation is used by the federal and state governments too. It is one means by which an institution can establish eligibility for participation in federally funded programs and for student financial aid. There is a decreased

need for intervention by public agencies in the operations of educational institutions because through accreditation their institutions are providing privately for the maintenance and enhancement of educational quality. In many states accreditation serves as a vehicle for consumer protection where the authorization of institutions to operate and grant degrees is dependent upon the institution's achieving and maintaining accredited status. In a number of professions, completion of an accredited program is a prerequisite for state licensure and entry to professional practice.

Businesses and industries look to accreditation for quality assurance when financing educational programs for employees, contributing to scholarship programs, supporting foundations or awarding grants to individual students or institutions. Accreditation is also usually relied upon by private foundations as a highly desirable indicator of institutional and program quality.

Relationships with the States

The states and accreditation share a mutual concern about educational quality and effectiveness. While neither can create good quality, both can provide incentives to quality improvement and accountability. The states have the regulatory power of the law and the incentive power of appropriations, and accreditation represents the self-regulatory power of the academic community itself. The states' relation to postsecondary education and accountability can be grouped into three types of interactions.

The first involves the states' responsibility for basic consumer protection, that is, for authorizing educational institutions to operate and grant degrees. Through authorization, the state decides whether the educational institution meets basic conditions of financial integrity and minimum conditions of educational and operational integrity. Thus, only the state can prevent the operation of "diploma mills" and submarginal institutions. For the protection of the public, the accrediting community strongly supports the states' authorization role. Because accreditation goes considerably beyond most authorization, some states accept accreditation in lieu of state authorization or make accreditation, or evidence of progress toward attaining it, a condition of continued authorization.

A second area of interaction involves cooperation among accrediting bodies and state higher education coordinating and governing boards. Accrediting bodies commonly notify state higher education agencies of pending accreditation reviews, and in some states the accrediting bodies depend upon the state agency to brief visiting teams about the public institutions. At the national level, COPA and the State Higher Education Executive Officers work

together to address issues of national concern related to interstate and interregional accrediting activities.

A third area of involvement is the relation of accreditation to statewide planning and program review. The analytic institutional self-study required by accreditation is a highly effective form of review and a basis for planning for the institution itself. To the extent it can become a continuing institutional evaluation process, the self-study can contribute substantially to the overall planning process both for the institution and the state.

Relationship with the Federal Government

The federal government has provided financial support to students and educational institutions through a wide variety of programs aimed at improving the welfare of society. With this financing has come a legitimate federal interest in determining which institutions and programs are educationally sound. Because there is an effective nongovernmental process for making such determinations, and because the federal government is restricted in its jurisdiction over education, a relationship has been established between accreditation and the determination of eligibility for federal funds.

Through accreditation the U.S. Department of Education is provided with reasonable assurance of the quality and integrity of institutions and programs, and the Secretary publishes a list of accrediting bodies which are recognized as reliable authorities of educational quality. In carrying out the recognition function, the Department of Education establishes criteria and periodically reviews institutional and specialized accrediting bodies to assure that they are in fact functioning as appropriate indicators of quality. Thus, the federal government provides for an appropriate use of accreditation while also adhering to the principle of separation of governmental from nongovernmental functions. Additionally, the accrediting community, through its Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, works cooperatively with the Department of Education and other federal agencies in addressing mutual concerns about the quality of postsecondary education.

The Role and Objectives of COPA

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) is a nongovernmental organization that facilitates the role of accrediting bodies. While established and supported by their membership, the accrediting bodies are intended to serve the broader interests of society as well. To promote these ends COPA recognizes, coordinates, and periodically reviews the work of its member accrediting bodies, and the appropriateness of existing or proposed accrediting bodies, through its granting of recognition and performance of other related functions.

The Council is asked to play a number of roles, though all that COPA does ultimately contributes to the first role, that is to promote, improve, and ensure the quality and diversity of American postsecondary education. Other roles of the Council are to balance the interests of accrediting bodies, institutions, and the public, to protect the integrity of the accrediting community, to protect the public interest, and to mediate federal and state concerns about accreditation.

These roles translate into activities in three basic categories: monitoring, leadership, and service. COPA's monitoring function—the review and recognition of accrediting bodies—provides assurance to students and the general public that the voluntary accrediting process is effectively and responsibly assessing quality and encouraging improvement. To do so, provisions and procedures have been established by the Council and are carried out primarily by a Committee on Recognition that reviews applications of accrediting bodies, examines relevant information, conducts hearings, and advises the Board.

Secondly, COPA provides national leadership on accreditation issues. COPA serves as an official voice for accreditation cultivating an understanding of the nature and significance of accreditation and developing support for the process among institutions, faculties, governing boards, state and federal governments, and the general public. This is carried out by promoting active collaboration among educational leaders, institutions and programs, and governmental agencies, through informational publications, and by publicly addressing current issues on educational quality.

Finally, COPA is a service organization for the accrediting bodies, institutions, organizations, and the public. Services include improving the accreditation process through the development of policies, coordinating professional development programs for members, providing a forum for discussion and development of national accreditation policy, promoting research, and disseminating information about accreditation.

Governance and Structure of COPA

The governance of COPA is vested in a 19-member Board of Directors which represents institutional and specialized accreditation, national associations of colleges and universities, and the public. The Board is the final approving body in the recognition of accrediting bodies. In addition, it directs activities of the Council, adopts policies, appoints committees and task forces to address particular issues, and approves the expenditure of funds.

The major groups concerned with accreditation are organized into three Assemblies which are an integral part of the Council. The members of the Assembly of Institutional Accrediting Bodies include the nine regional commissions and the six national associations which accredit total institutions. The Assembly of Specialized Accrediting Bodies is comprised of approximately forty specialized groups which accredit professional preparation programs and some single-purpose institutions. The Presidents Policy Assembly on Accreditation includes seven major national postsecondary institutional organizations which in themselves do not sponsor accreditation but which have a major interest in the development of accreditation-related policies and activities. The Assemblies provide a forum for member groups to exchange views, debate issues, and make recommendations for action to the Board of Directors which governs the Council.

With COPA, postsecondary education has a national coordinating organization designed to help maintain the balance of the total accrediting process, monitor its relationship to government interests, and increase the awareness and understanding of the various publics concerned with the soundness of institutions and their programs. With a constituency that includes all types of postsecondary education, it is the most broadly representative of the national education associations.

Periodically, COPA itself undergoes a self-study and review similar to the organizations it recognizes. The first self-study in 1981 led to a major reorganization with objectives, structure, and governance system closely resembling the current organization. The most recent self-study in 1986 did not result in any major organizational changes, but the report contained important recommendations for COPA and for the accrediting community at large. A major emphasis was placed on accreditation's role in the improvement of the quality of postsecondary education. This led to the formation of COPA's Initiative to Improve Quality which originated with a series of conferences involving postsecondary educational organizations, institutional and specialized accrediting bodies, institutional administrators, state and federal governmental agencies, and public representatives. It is expected that from the ongoing initiative new approaches to evaluation and accreditation will

result in renewed attention to qualitative measures including the assessment of educational outcomes and a greater emphasis on institutional and program improvement.

Policy Development within COPA

In carrying out its purpose of serving as an official voice for accreditation, COPA provides a forum for discussion and development of public policies. The testimonial policy statements, products of task forces or committees, are developed with consultation from COPA constituencies and are subsequently adopted by the Board as public position statements. Agency statements are guidelines which affect or relate to how accrediting bodies carry out their own mission and accredit their own members. Such guidelines are directly relevant to and consistent with COPA recognition provisions. They require full consultation with all member accrediting bodies and with the Assemblies before final adoption by the Board. Discussion of one testimonial statement and one agency statement follow.

The Joint Policy Statement of Transfer and Award of Academic Credit is endorsed by the three national associations most concerned with such practices —the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, the American Council on Education/Commission on Educational Credit, and the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation. The policy addresses both the transfer of academic credit among institutions and award of academic credit for extra-institutional learning. *Transfer of credit involves the general acceptance of credits among accredited institutions when the student performance has been satisfactory and the credits to be transferred are appropriate to the receiving institution.*

For reasons of social equity and educational effectiveness, as well as for the wise use of resources, it is important for institutions to have definitive policies and procedures for acceptance of transfer credit. It is the responsibility of each institution to furnish transcripts and other documents and of the receiving institution to provide reasonable policies for determining a student's knowledge in a subject area. Transfer of credit involves transfer between dissimilar institutions and curricula as well as those of similar characteristics and involves at least the following three considerations: (1) the educational quality of the institution from which the student transfers; (2) the comparability of the nature, content, and level of credit earned to that offered by the receiving institution; and (3) the appropriateness and applicability of the credit earned to the programs offered by the receiving institution in light of the student's educational goals. Accreditation relates to the first two of these considerations, serving as the basic indicator that an institution meets certain minimum standards and speaking to the probability that students have met acceptable standards of educational accomplishment.

While COPA is interested in transfer credit issues involving foreign institutions, it does not provide evaluation services. Several other organizations assist institutions by distributing general guidelines on admission and placement of foreign students. These include the Council on International Educational Exchange, the National Council on the Evaluation of Foreign Student Credentials, the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, and the National Liaison Committee on Foreign Student Admissions.

Validation of extra-institutional and experiential learning is also related to transfer credit practices. The Center for Adult Learning and Educational Credentials of the American Council on Education maintains evaluation programs for formally structured courses offered by the military and civilian non-collegiate sponsors such as business, corporations, government agencies, and labor unions. Evaluation services are also available for examination programs, for occupations with validated job proficiency evaluation systems, and for correspondence courses. The Council for Advancement of Experiential Learning provides evaluation services also.

The diversity of American higher education is seen not only in the kinds and types of institutions and programs available but also in the varying modes of delivery of quality education regardless of location. *The Policy Statement on Off-Campus Credit Programs* assures attention to the assessment of off-campus programs which lead to a certificate, diploma, degree, or other formal credential. Each COPA-recognized accrediting body is expected to reflect the principles of this statement in its operational policies and procedures for accreditation.

In regard to off-campus educational activities, the following principles apply. An institutional accrediting body is responsible for evaluating the quality and integrity of all programs of the institution wherever they are located. Key factors include administrative and academic control, availability of resources, and supervisory accountability. A specialized accrediting body evaluates all components of an educational program wherever it is located. Emphasis is placed on the assessment of outcomes, results, or value-added factors with respect to institutional or program effectiveness and student learning and performance. An institution is directly responsible for all of its off-campus educational activities, and that responsibility cannot be delegated to third parties. When off-campus units are acquired by merger or purchase, this constitutes a substantive change requiring an accreditation review. Accrediting bodies have developed procedural guidelines for use in conjunction with this policy statement.

Summary

American postsecondary education reflects a diverse composite of institutions and programs. By design, it functions with considerable latitude and few restrictions. Accreditation serves as the balance between institutional autonomy and responsibility to students, the public, the professions, and various levels of government. As a self-regulatory process, the national, nongovernmental accreditation system ensures that education remains fundamentally sound, responsible, and effective, thereby providing public confidence in the integrity and quality of educational institutions and programs.

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The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
One Dupont Circle, Suite 305
Washington, DC 20036
Telephone: 202-452-1433
Facsimile: 202-331-9571